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ABSTRACT

A description of the pragmatic functions of word order in the Bantu language, Sesotho, and of how children begin to produce them illustrates the developmental trends characterizing Sesotho-speaking children's learning of different word orders. It supports findings from previous language acquisition studies that have indicated that children tend initially to encode comment relations and assume topic relations. Such usage is evidenced by children's initial use of focused constructions almost to the exclusion of unfocused constructions, even when communication breakdowns occur. Except for the case of simple identity questions, children near two years use alternative strategies of repetition of the same utterances, increased prosody, no-verbal cues, and the addition or deletion of information in attempt to effect listener comprehension. Passive and cleft construction, while both used independently by two and a half years, are not used jointly to indicate shifts of focus until three years or more. At two and a half years, right dislocated constructions are very prominent, becoming a preferred discourse form in intransitive constructions when subjects are known. However, topicalization does not become productive until well after three years. (MSE)

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THE ACQUISITION OF PRAGMATIC WORD ORDER IN SESOTHO

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Languages provide a variety of grammatical strategies which a speaker can use to indicate subtle pragmatic differences of contrast and focus. Chafe (1976) has discussed several of the grammatical forms by which topic-comment relations are rendered salient. Such devices include the use of definitizers, adverbs and adjectives, embedding constructions such as relative clauses and clefts, changes in word order from active to passive constructions, contrastive stress patterns and modification of constructions through the addition, contrast or replacement of information. This paper describes the pragmatic functions of word order in the Bantu language Sesotho and attempts to explain how children begin to produce them.

1.0 Topic-Comment Relations

Adult speech has been characterized by the notion of topic-comment relations (Li & Thompson 1976), whereby old information is fronted (often subjects) and new information is postposed (often objects). Children's early use of language, however, indicates a radically different picture of topic-comment relations from that described above for adults. Greenfield (1979) notes that young children tend to assume given information (such as agent), and provide only uncertain, or new information (often the action). Children tend to focus on the actions or goals of a situation rather than on the agents which perform them. omitted in child speech at two years.

Bates and McWhinney (1979) have similarly noted that children begin to encode agent/topic relations before surface subject. Here again chidren's early use of language is primarily based on speaker needs, not on those of the hearer. Evidence from such child discourse strategies comes from Dutch (Snow 1978) and Italian (Fava & Tirondola 1977) studies where it was found that children first tried to use comment-topic word order. When this failed to be effective, the children shifted to topic initial constructions and communication was successful. Sesotho speaking children too demonstrate many of the non-adult discourse strategies observed in previous language acquisition studies.

2.0 Pragmatic Use of Word Order in Sesotho

Basic Sesotho word order is SVO, with object pronoun cliticizing before the verb, as seen in examples 1. and 2. below:

1.	ke	batla	ntjá	2.	ke-a	e	bátla
	sc	V	O		sc-foc	obj	V
	I	want	dog		I	it	want
	I want a/the dog.				I want it.		

Objects can be topicalized (example 3.) when there is a topic shift, the establishing of a new topic, or the reintroduction of an old topic. This construction is also used in trying to establish control of a conversation.

3.	ntjá	kę-a	e	bátla	4.	kę-a	e	bátla	ntjá
	0	sc-foc	obj	V		sc-foc	obj	V	0
	dog	I	it	want		I	it	want	dog
	the/a dog, I want it					I want it, the dog			

Right dislocation in example 4., on the other hand, functions occasionally as an afterthought, to clarify the object pronoun if the speaker realizes it is not known to the hearer, as an expression of surprize, doubt, emphasis or contrast, or to deemphasise the assertaion and focus on the arguement.

Unfocused wh-questions in Sesotho are formed with question words in final position, such as in example 5. These are used when first mentioning a topic, or first questiioning the identity of a topic. In contrast, wh-fronted questions like that in 6. are most frequently used in adult speech after the question in example 5. has already been asked.

5.	ntho	eé	ké	ǫ̂ng?	6.	ké	éng	ntho	eé?
	thing	this	cop	what		cop	what	thing	this
	What is this thing?					This thing is what?			

With questions involving a verbal predicate, where the unfocused question form is that of a cleft construction, the wh-question words are found sentence initially, as shown in example 7.:

7.	ké	máng	ea	ǫ	f-ilé-ng	ntjá?
	cop	wh-	rel	obj	V-prf-rel	0
	it's who	who	you	gave		dog
	Who/It's who who gave you the/a dog?					

Right dislocation of wh-question words occurs most frequently with passive constructions like that in example 8., or with topicalization and passivization, as in example 9.:

8.	ǫ	f-íl	ó-e	ntjá	ké	mâng?
	sc	V-prf-pas	0		cop	wh-
	you given		dog		by	who
	Who were you given the dog by?					

9.	ntjá	ǫ	e	f-íl	-ó-e	ké	mâng?
	0	sc	obj	V-prf-pas		cop	wh-
	dog	you	it	were-given		by	who
	The dog, you were given it by who?						

Cleft constructions like those in example 7. are the unfocused form of a question used upon first introduction, while the passivized form is used

to focus on the verb phrase in 8. and on the object in 9. Both are used as a second rendition if the question in form 7. has failed to elicit a response on the part of the hearer.[1] We turn now to examine how adults manipulate these contructions to achieve effective communication with children.

3.0 Adult uses of pragmatic word order

As might be expected, adults and caregivers possess a much larger repertoire for use of pragmatic word order than do children. Adults often employ several different strategies within one speech event (used here in the sense of ongoing turns which terminate with successful communication, or with the abandonment of that particular topic). Thus, in the question routine in 10. we find shifts from passive to cleft constructions (a & b, c & d), a minor tense/aspect shift from a) to b), the right dislocation of subject in d), and final resorting to an unfocused wh-question type, rather than cleft or passive, in e):

10. Grandmother J is engaging grandniece 'Neuoe (30.0) in conversation, pressing her for information concerning which child (affectionately called 'grandmother here) hit 'Neuoe.

a) ǫ 'la shátj-o-a kę́ mâng?
sc pst V-pas cop wh-
You were lashed by who?

b) Kę́ mâng a n'a ǫ shápa? (2x) (another child
cop wh- sc pst-cont sc V tries to prompt
it's who who you lashed N in between J's
Who/It's who who lashed you? repetitions)

(N tries to respond)

c) ǫ n'ǫ shátj-o-a kę́ nkhǫnǫ mârg?
sc pst-cont V-pas cop N wh-
You were lashed by grandmother who?

d) Kę́ máng a n'a ǫ shápa nkhǫ́nǫ?
cop wh- sc pst-cont obj V N
it's who who you lashed grandmother
Who/It's who who lashed you, the grandmother?

[1] See Tenenbaum (1977) and Givon (1975) for indepth discussions of similar constructions and their pragmatic functions in Bantu languages Haya and Bemba respectively.

(N tries to respond)

e) É? Nkhóŋọ a n'a ọ shápá kẹ́ mâng? É?
wh S sc pst-cont obj V cop wh- wh
uh grandmother who you lashed is who uh
Un? Who is the grandmother who lashed you? Uh?

(N finally answers)

Notice that passive constructions are used before the corresponding cleft construction, suggesting adult attempts to focus the child's attention on the action which occured. This accomodation on the part of the speaker might also be seen as an effort to focus on what is most salient to the child. Thus, while Basotho do not demonstrate many of the forms of 'baby-talk' as we think of it in English, they appear to use less overt verbal means of catering to the child's needs. Such usage tends to be somewhat speaker specific, some caregivers using focused constructions almost entirely, while others' use is reserved for problematic communicative situations.

In sum, adults use focused constructions either 1) to accomodate to the child's normal focus and/or 2) to help focus the child's attention on what the speaker considers to be salient and wishes the hearer/child to focus on. We turn now to a discussion of children's use of focused and unfocused word orders and how this develops over time.

4.0 Child use of pragmatic word order

Children employ repetitions, along with gestures and prosocid intensity as early strategies for trying to make themselves understood. Example 11. below illustrates a case where a young child is interacting with a less than competent speaker. Here Hlobohang uses the same passive construction repeatedly, resorting to prosodic intensity to attempt successful communication.

11. Hlobohang (27.3) is trying unsuccessfully to ask researcher K who bought her the tape recorder.

H a rekélá é mâng?
(ọ e rek-éts-ó-ọ kẹ́)
you it buy- cop who
ben/prf/pas
Who bought it for you?

(K doesn't understand)

K M.
Yes.

H a rekéla é mâng?
(ǫ e rek-éts-ó-ę kę́)
you it buy- cop who
ben/prf/pas
Who bought it for you?

K Kę́ eá-ka.
cop my
It's mine.

(H is indignant - his question
is not being answered)

H a rekéla lé mâng?!
(ǫ e rek-éts-ó-ę kę́)
you it buy- cop who
ben/prf/pas
Who bought it for you?!

Note here the use of the passive, rather than the cleft. This is consistant with the observed phenomena that young children focus on the action, in this case the buying of the taperecorder, rather than on who did the buying. At this early age Hlobohang apparently does not posess the linguistic knowledge or skills to be able to switch back and forth form cleft to passive and visa versa. Children do use occasional cleft constructions at 2 years of age. This particular child, however, demonstrated a dramatic increase in the use of cleft constructions at 30.0 months. It is not clear yet exactly when and how the manipulation of cleft/passive constructions becomes productive.

Use of simple wh-questions, however, is already productive at 25.0 months, as seen below with focused a) and unfocused b) and focused plus demonstratiave c) are employed:

12. Hlobohang (25.0) and Mololo (4.5 yrs) are playing 'cars'.

a) É kaę́ e'ngoę́?
sc wh- S
It's where another one?

b) É'ngóę́ é kâę́?
S sc wh-
Another one is where?

c) É kaę́ e'ngoę́ éla?
sc wh- S dem
it's where another one that
It's where, that other one?

The use of cleft constructions increases quite dramatically (at least for one child) at 2 1/2 years. At this time we find that the same child begins to produce right dislocated constructions with extreme frequency. The function of these right dislocated constructions is not so much an after thought or clarification of the subject for the hearer as it is of the already specified referent. These data are consistant with the comment-topic word order used by Italian and Dutch children. Examples such as the following are very common:

13. Mololo (5 yrs) and Hlobohang (30.0) are playing cars.

a) Mol É́rę́ kę bone koloî
hort sc V O
let me see car
Let me see the car.

b) H E-a tsamáea koloi eá:ka
sc-foc V S pos
it go car my
It's going, my car.

c) H E phethǫ́-ilé lękhale-ng koloi éa ka
sc V-prf N-loc S pos
it turned-over aloe-at car my
It turned over at the aloe, my car.

Left dislocation, on the other hand, is not a discourse strategy used by young Sesotho speaking children. This construction begins to be used productively by the age of 3 1/2 or 4, primarily to focus the hearer's attention on a new or reintroduced topic. Mololo uses a topicalized construction in a) and a right dislocated construction in c).

14. Mololo (4.6 yrs) is playing with a flashlight (torch), turning it off and on while H (26.2) is roasting potatoes in the ashes from the fire.

a) Tɔ́:ch éa háu kę́ e tímme,
O pos sc obj V-prf
flashlight your I it turned-off
Your flashlight, I'm turning it off.

b) Kę e timme hore,
sc obj V-prf interj
I it turned-off like-this
I turned it off like this.

c) Kę e timme tɔ:ch
sc obj V-prf 0
I it turned-off flashlight
I turned it off, the flashlight.

Here the focus of the utterance, or the comment, would appear to be the torch in a), while b) and c) focus on the action in which the referent is involved.

5.0 Discussion

The data from this study illustrate the developmental trends which characterize Sesotho speaking children's learning of different word orders. It supports findings from previous language acquisition studies which have indicated that children tend initially to encode comment relations and assume topic relations. Such usage is evidenced by children's initial use of focused constructions almost to the exclusion of unfocused constructions, even when communication breakdowns occur. Except for the case of simple identity questions, children around the age of 2 years use alternative strategies of repetition of the same utterances, increased prosody, non-verbal cues and the addition or deletion of information in attempts to effect comprehension on the part of the hearer. Passive and cleft constructions, while both used independently by 2 1/2 years, are not used jointly to indicate shifts of focus until 3 years or more. Again, at 2 1/2 years right dislocated constructions are very prominent, becoming a prefered form of discourse in intransitive constructions when subjects are known information. Topicalization, however, does not become productive until well after 3 years.

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